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- 1 Despoina N. Feleki, *Stephen King in the New Millennium: Gothic Mediations on New Writing Materialities*
- 2 Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. Pp 255. ISBN: 978-1527504073
- 3 Francisco Silveira
- 4
- 5 It could perhaps be said that Stephen King writes at the door and – knock knock –, whether he makes it sound through the hand, the pen, the typewriter or the word processor, he inscribes a suspenseful look on the reader. As if fixed on the 23:59 clock hand, the core of his work lies between the moment of “hearing” and the imminent instant of someone opening it. Always on the verge of something, between the childish fear of darkness of what’s about to come and the palpitating thrill of good news. Self-reflexively, King projects himself into the interior of the house, unfolding into artists’ characters that metaphorize “established notions, such as popular fiction, the writer, the text and the fan, in order to reconfigure their relationship and promote their active involvement in novel contexts” (200).
- 6 Judging from the design of its front cover alone, *Stephen King in the New Millennium: Gothic Mediations on New Writing Materialities* is in tune with such a premise. By painting the “wall” with a digital rain reminiscent of the old monochrome CRT monitors, with the same blackness rain splattered “in” green by the cybernetic universes of cyberpunk fiction; by framing in its center a “window” with a rustic, brown and wooden floor inhabited by notebooks and a typewriter, the designer anticipates the author’s structural argument through the book’s frontispiece. The argument that “by exploiting marketing trends and embracing the interconnectedness of transmedia storytelling, King ultimately

manages to reform traditional writing practices and, more importantly, to reshape literary geographies" (200).

- 7 Along this line, it doesn't seem merely random that, persisting in the materialities of the cover, a notebook and a typewriter both green in the interior of the frame establish a chromatic continuity with the surrounding cyberspace. From these touching margins, "[i]n the new literary landscapes he has set up" (200), as Feleki concludes, King "works to bridge diverse practices and new voices" (200). The fact that the typewriter and notebooks are represented, and that numerical data/computer code is torrentially instituted as the "wall" or even as an absolute street, only helps to locate and to title the monograph "in the New Millennium." That is, in a book in which remediation is the message, the transcoding of that old, general and unstoppable writing process is what matters above all as the "New Writing Materialities" of a contemporaneity move towards post-digitality.
- 8 Faced with a writing "on the way to," Despoina Feleki begins, in chapter 1, by looking for a common-ground element, finding it in the "Gothic Mediations" that form the building blocks of Stephen King's vast bibliographical house. After introducing her research on the "convergence of fiction writing with digital technology" (xviii) – whose resulting "participatory culture" (Henry Jenkins) is inextricable from both an entertainment industry pressing for mass consumption and profit by fattening authors to "brand," "celebrity," "corporation," and new aesthetic structures fostering a redefinition of the literary in the 21st century – and after distinguishing/justifying it with the risky assertion that King "has never been examined under the prism of electronic studies before" (xxxiii), Feleki first analyzes the analog as informed by the digital.
- 9 In keeping with the media ecology of the front cover, that opening chapter focuses on the heterodox gothic heritage that characterizes the writer's fiction through the exemplary analysis of two of his post-third millennium novels, works whose literary form is based on the print medium: *Lisey's Story* (2006) and *Duma Key* (2008). Looking at King's main genre, and at his most recent works, the author's perspective seemingly proposes a double movement, a hypergothicization and a "degothicization" (Catherine Spooner *apud*, 25) capable of recomposing and revitalizing the transgressive "combination of horror and romance [...] as a reaction to the pressures of the industrial age" (13) for a transmedia audience.
- 10 This way, hyperbolizations of the traditional gothic's sensorial excess can be identified through an even more cinematographic writing by the saturation of a visual vocabulary, polyphonies in the narration or even through the tortured and illuminated artists in the novels' plots. There are also overdoses of the formless due to multiple narrative strands and several spatiotemporal dimensions in the stories, and because of the constant spreading to other genres...
- 11 As for the "degothicization" movement, Feleki emphasizes strategies such as transposing scenarios from haunted castles, picturesque monasteries, ruined houses and underground tunnels to protagonists' banal rooms/attics, urban spaces bathed by digital or cybernetic surfaces; the insertion of comic reliefs by rescuing canonical names of the genre, like Poe, just to play with the trope of ghosts that interact with living people; the logical explanation of some supernatural events as a means of undermining the fantastic atmosphere.

- 12 Indeed, far from being opposites, the hypergothicization and “degothicization” dynamics echo the media convergence which the researcher proves to be more than incidental in King’s work. Accordingly, in *Duma Key*, multiple “references to well-known films, directors and actors, such as Marlon Brando in the *Godfather* and Alfred Hitchcock flood the narration” (36), but they flood it in such circumstances that “these connections to real-life personalities placed in a dreamy setting force ghostly creatures and story characters into a peaceful co-existence” (36). In other words, a tug-of-war pulling of ropes between enchantment and reality that results in increased immersion: from a factual fiction that is a fictional fact that is a...
- 13 Continuing the exploration of binomial and self-reflexive games, in the second chapter of the book the idea that “[t]he Gothic becomes the medium through which King renegotiates the boundaries between the past and present literary tradition and gives meaning to present concerns” (31) will be extended to address the conditions of production created by the ecology of digital media. By this I mean that Feleki focuses on changes related to the softwarization of culture in the literary text of the American writer at narrative, representational and organizational levels.
- 14 Partly rivaled by the immediacy of the fast-growing hypertextual empire, the “master of horror” thus employs intensive methods of remediation. Methods which are not altogether different from the reinvention strategies of the gothic mentioned above and which, for example, include making the hero of *Duma Key*, the contractor Edgar Freemantle, narrate as follows: “He said Nannuzzi wanted to photograph my paintings and make slides for a lecture at the Selby Library [...]” (Stephen King *apud*, 74). Victim of a serious workplace accident that leaves him brain-damaged, sensorially handicapped and with an amputated arm, which leads him to a feverish need to create, this projection of King points to the idea that “[t]he reappropriation of the paintings by an electronic medium contributes to the repurposing of this work of art, and rejects the right of only one expressive medium to a grand narrative” (*ibidem*).
- 15 In the same vein, the author explains that the recurring instances of *ekphrasis* and the incorporation of different media in the narration – from descriptions of film scenes watched by the characters themselves to attempts at emulating in the page the shape of email conversations – “work like links to multimedia applications, redirecting the readers’ attention to the audio and visual elements that appear in the story” (77). According to Feleki, it is in this way that the American writer has been able to sustain his popularity, being less a visionary than a personification of the spirit of the times, a meteorological station – his success “is evidence that the textual psyche he constructs is one which in some sense ‘matches’ the cultural psyche of the late twentieth century in the West” (David Punter *apud*, 15). He is so by using the mainstream appeal of the “gothic” lexicon as a root, exploring inner conflicts (*e.g.* childhood traumas) and relatable sociopolitical tensions (*e.g.* gender violence).
- 16 Thus – tying up the logic of the citation transcribed above, the one saying “[t]he Gothic becomes the medium [...]” (31) –, Feleki apparently reveals (in King) an overlap between the grotesque, mutable nature and the emphatic visuality of the gothic genre itself, and the concept of remediation. As if informed by Shelley Jackson’s electronic and hypertextual piece *Patchwork Girl*, by the postmodern version of Frankenstein’s monster, by the idea of a monster as that which infringes any cultural boundary, the writer takes on the gothic as remediation.

- 17 In view of this, during part II of *Stephen King in the New Millennium*, composed of chapters 3 and 4, Feleki examines the next step of that shattering of media boundary and specificity. That is to say, after proposing that King writes the computer screen into a printed novel, she goes towards the “formless place” where the author superbly merges the old gothic sublime with a new technological sublime: the digital, the internet itself.
- 18 Therefore, in order to consider the integration of the American writer and his creatures into a transmedia gothic culture of graphic novels and videogames *circa* the third millennium, Feleki assigns a portion of chapter 3 to *Ur* (2009), a title that resulted from an exclusive order for the e-reader platform *Amazon Kindle*. Once again, there is a thematization of remediation, something obvious in quotes such as “Will it ever replace the book?” (Stephen King *apud*, 104) and “At the top was amazonkindle and the smile logo Wesley knew well” (Stephen King *apud*, 107).
- 19 For the remainder of this chapter, the author focuses on the official website *StephenKing.com*, while the following chapter takes *Discordia* (2009-) as her case study. Feleki stresses the more than promotional character of the site which is, above all, a borgean multiverse. It is then symptomatic that the very concept of multiverse exists in King’s work to connect several of his works, since the “journal-esque” and hypermedia structure of the site end up materializing that huge transnarrative: there, the user comes across “a million” choices such as an interactive virtualization of King’s office, audiobook samples, teasers for movies, books and graphic novels, a link to his radio station, fan fiction, message boards... . And all of this leads to the hypothesis of navigating through an extensive library and multimedia archive of his work.
- 20 Consequently, what Feleki does is a study of the microworlds contained in each link (beginning with the graphic choices), the ultimate indistinction between the real and the fictional King they promote. Next, by “clicking” on the “door” for the multi-genre saga *The Dark Tower*, the red and black of the typical gothic atmosphere take over the screen; “clicking” again, now on a *Discordia* rectangle, a dark-gray background with green phosphor characters (in accordance with the cover of Feleki’s monograph) places the user on the gothic.com that the researcher had outlined earlier. She considers *Discordia*, this gamified and online electronic experience, the climax of her argument.
- 21 “Just as the Dark Tower is the nexus point of the time/space continuum within the context of the Dark Tower novels, so the Dark Tower novels are the linchpin of Stephen King’s creative multiverse” (*StephenKing.com apud*, 190), and maybe it is appropriate for one to add that *Discordia* is, for Feleki, “The” Stephen King of the new millennium. It is so because *Discordia* is the output of an entire authorial team; it is also an immersive bridge between cinema, videogames, novel and painting; it offers a corporative-narrative synergy of a transmedia (para)text; and finally, given its unstable nature – related to the “information on the edge of a cliff” one calls internet (the project resorts to *Flash!*) –, as well as its open-ended story, inducing a sensation of programmed insufficiency which instills a desire for prolonged engagement and dramatic agency in its readers.
- 22 On top of all this, the author explains that *Discordia*, a spin-off of *The Dark Tower*, is an experience about magic and technology, corporations fighting for dominance of the multiverse. *In medias res*, precisely, it is not about beginnings and ends, but about entrances and exits. Doors, infinite doors... and it could perhaps be said that the reader-investigator – now the “hero [...] entering mysterious doors and moving in and out of

people's minds, bodies and temporal dimensions" (118) – writes on the move while facing the fog in between them.

- 23 Although somewhat impaired by an argumentative repetition/circularity that recurs beyond the "theory-analysis" structuring within each chapter and by its excessive holistic dimension, in the sense that part of the theoretical apparatus does not seem to be challenged (and is very rarely rethought) by the specificities of each object of study, serving instead as generic frameworks – to sum up, the book would benefit from a trimming –, *Stephen King in the New Millennium* forcefully shows the American writer as the green-screener he has long been but which had not been so thoroughly demonstrated before.
- 24 After all, as Matthew Kirschenbaum ventured in his *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*, King's short story "The Word Processor," from 1983, is "likely the first extended fictional treatment of word processing by a prominent English-language author" (Kirschenbaum, 77).¹
- 25 Feleki never mentions it, nor does she address King's early adoption of such writing technology, but her study does illuminate the adulthood of that precise anxious dazzle, of editing paralyzed at God's speed, of a new toolbox knocking at the door.

26

NOTES

1. Mathew G. Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016. The various passages from *Track Changes* dedicated to Stephen King, to his purchase/use of the Wang System 5 Model 3 computer (circa 1982) and to the mentioned metafictional short story may constitute a solid intertextual preamble or complement to her monograph.